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Casey, NSA chief appeal to media

WASHINGTON (AP) — The directors of the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency shifted gears yesterday and appealed to news organizations to cooperate in efforts to stem intelligence leaks they claim have cost both human lives and billions of taxpayer dollars.

CIA Director William J. Casey and the NSA chief, Lt. Gen. William Odom, in a unique joint interview at CIA headquarters, played down their recent threats of criminal prosecution against news organizations and even backed slightly off a warning they had issued only the night before to reporters covering the espionage trial of a former NSA communications expert, Ronald Pelton.

Mr. Casey, General Odom and Mr. Casey's deputy, Robert M. Gates, agreed to the interview with the Associated Press, in Mr. Gates' words, "to lower the noise level, turn down the volume and have a serious dialogue."

"We haven't made ourselves always as clear as we might be," Mr. Casey said. "And I think that certainly the press has been very hysterical about the thing, saying we're trying to tear up the First Amendment and scuttle the freedom of the press. We're not trying to do that."

The intelligence officials appealed to reporters working on stories that involve intelligence-gathering techniques to call the CIA for guidance on which details might risk lives or compromise expensive information-gathering equipment.

"We're saying that you can write about the whole range of national security issues without revealing unique, fragile national intelligence sources," Mr. Gates said.

Mr. Casey added, "We will work with you on that line. I wish you'd make clear the narrow line we're treading here and the sensitivity we have to the broader rights and needs and contributions of the press."

Mr. Casey and General Odom said they were led to take their extraordinary actions of the last several weeks because, General Odom said, "A series of recent signals-intelligence leaks over the last six months is the most serious we can remember in a long, long time."

Mr. Casey added, "Every method we have of obtaining intelligence: our agents, our relationships with other intelligence services, our photographic, our electronic, our communications capabilities have been damaged. Every one of them has been severely damaged by disclosures of sensitive information that lets our adversaries defeat those capabilities and to literally take them away from us.

Mr. Casey and Mr. Gates both said there were agents who had not been heard from after disclosures in this country. They declined to provide details.

The interview came after a White House spokesman earlier in the day had said reporters covering the Pelton trial should not disclose information beyond what is released by the government and that journalists in general should not disclose classified information.

Edward Djerejian, the spokesman, said a statement Wednesday by the CIA and the NSA cautioning reporters not to speculate beyond information released at the Pelton trial had been cleared by President Reagan's national security adviser, John Poindexter. Mr. Djerejian added, "We are in full agreement with the thrust of that statement."

Newspaper and network officials said yesterday they didn't view it as the responsibility of the government to counsel the media on how to cover the news. None of them said they intend to alter their coverage because of the administration's concerns.

George Watson, an ABC vice president and chief of its Washington bureau, said, "We have always been attentive to situations where disclosing information could clearly damage the national security, but the Pelton case does not fit that definition. . . . I think it's gravely disturbing that the administration, in its zeal to dry up leakers, is making the press a target as well. We do respect legitimate situations involving national security, but information that Pelton provided the Soviet Union is of course known to the Soviet Union. It does not involve any damage to the national security for the public to know what the Soviets know."

Ron Martin, executive director of *USA Today*, said the government warnings "sound a little like intimidation to me. I don't think it's really up to Mr. Casey or the government to decide how trials are covered. Obviously we will take into consideration anything a responsible public official says, just as we would anyone else. But I don't think it's the job of Mr. Casey to decide how the trial should be covered. We will cover [the Pelton] trial as we would any other trial," he said.

"How the press covers this trial is a matter for the press to decide, not the government," agreed Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of *The Washington Post*. Mr. Bradlee said "after listening to the highest councils of government for a number of months, we have acted responsibly in balancing the national security and the national interest. We will continue to do so."

James I. Houck, managing editor of *The Sun*, said, "While we understand and are sensitive to the government's national security concerns, we believe it's our responsibility to our readers to cover the Pelton trial with the same aggressiveness that we would observe in covering any trial."

On Wednesday, Mr. Casey and General Odom had cautioned reporters at the Pelton trial in Baltimore "against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial."

Legal experts, inside and outside the government, quickly pointed out that the government had no power to regulate "speculation" by news organizations.

Although they complained about the criticism of their statement, both Mr. Casey and General Odom tempered the remarks a bit yesterday.

"If I had it to do over again, I might not use that word," Mr. Casey said. "I might use 'extrapolation.' "

General Odom added, "There's nothing in there that says we're going to try to prosecute anybody based on speculation."

They were asked why in the Pelton trial the government is attempting to protect information that is widely known to U.S. reporters and widely believed to be known to the Soviet Union — such as the wiretapping by U.S. agents of telephones at the Soviet Embassy here.

Mr. Gates responded: "How does any member of the press know what the Russians know? Does anyone in the media have any penetrations of the [Soviet] KGB [spy agency]? And they don't know the degree to which the information they provide amplifies on what a spy may have given, confirms what a spy may have given or updates what a spy has given up."

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